

## NEW BOOK ON S'PORE-INDIA LINKS

# S'pore wooed India from early days

A young Lee Kuan Yew saw potential of Asian giant over 50 years ago

■ BY ZAKIR HUSSAIN

TO MANY, Singapore's engagement with India is a recent phenomenon.

But a new book shows that Singapore's desire for strong links with the Asian giant dates back more than 50 years, when a young Lee Kuan Yew was inspired by India's nationalist struggle.

And Mr Lee never lost faith in the potential of India, the book shows, for he kept stressing that Asia would be "submerged" if India did not "emerge".

Singapore today looms large in India's public consciousness "only because of Lee's robust proselytisation", it adds.

Written by veteran Indian journalist Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, a former editorial consultant with The Straits Times, *Looking East To Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India* was launched by President S R Nathan at the Shangri-La Hotel yesterday.

Mr Datta-Ray, 72, had eight long conversations with Minister Mentor Lee from 2005 to 2008 for the book and relied on material from public records as well as interviews with current and former leaders and diplomats from both countries.

The 384-page book is published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas), where Mr Datta-Ray was a visiting senior research fellow for 18 months, from 2006 to 2008.

The idea for the book came at the old Straits Times office in Kim Seng Road, where Mr Datta-Ray worked from 1993 to 1999. While browsing through old speeches of Mr Lee, he came across

speeches the Minister Mentor had made that compared India's imprint in South-east Asia with Greek and Roman influence in Europe.

Mr Lee had also lauded India for its foresight and industrialisation plans.

"Compliments to India were so unusual in Singapore at that time, and local gossip so firmly branded Lee anti-Indian that my curiosity was aroused," Mr Datta-Ray wrote.

But work caused the idea to be put on the back burner, until a meeting with Mr Lee in 2005. Mr Datta-Ray was speaking at a seminar here on the legacy of World War II on the region when word came that Mr Lee had asked to see him.

It turned out that Mr Lee wanted to discuss a lecture he was to deliver in India several months later.

Mr Datta-Ray found Mr Lee surprisingly chatty, and the conversation went on to his early speeches on India.

He broached the idea for the book; Mr Lee thought it a good idea and asked his elated guest to start right away.

The opportunity came when Mr Datta-Ray, who calls Kolkata home, received an Iseas fellowship.

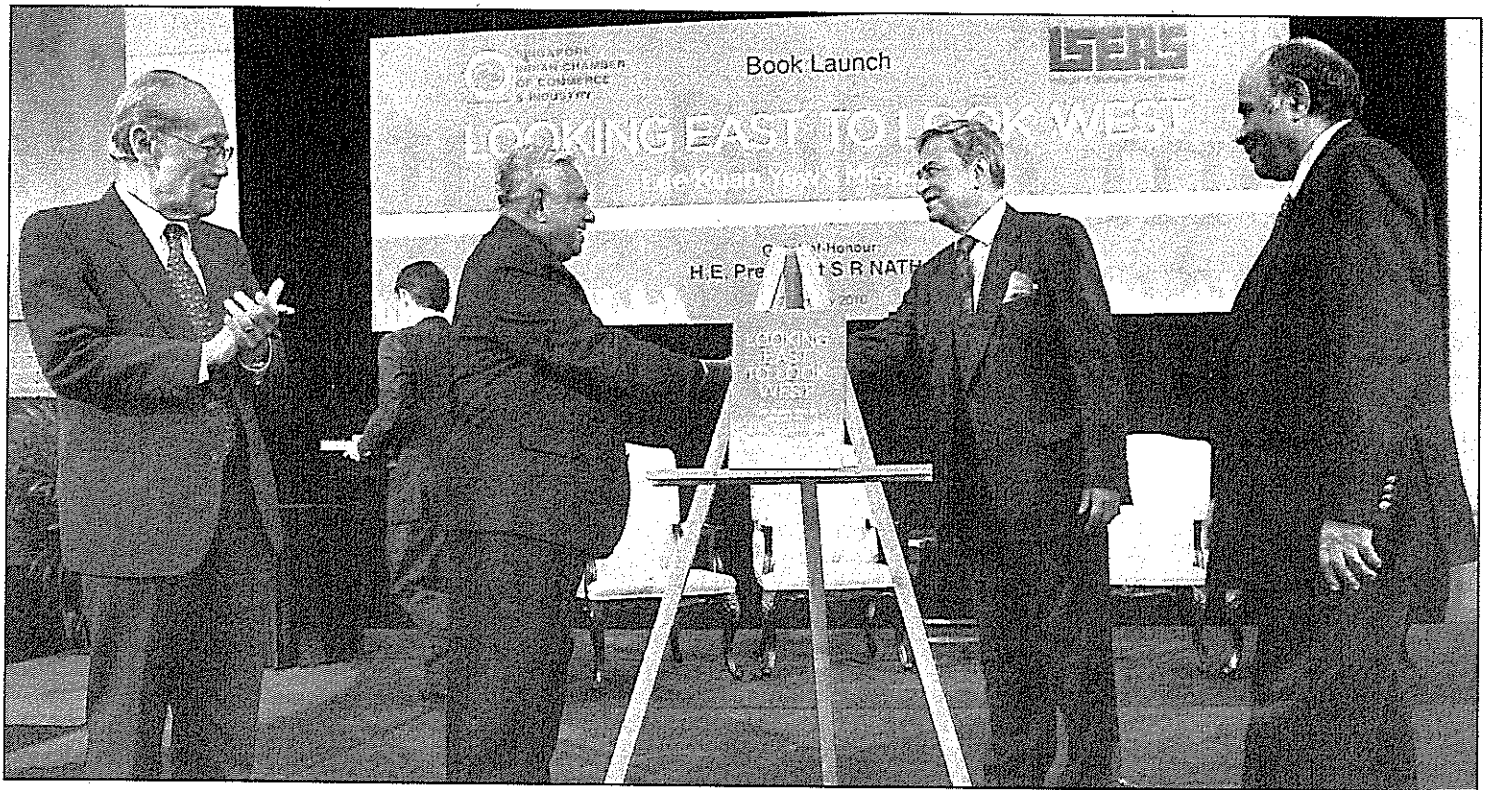
The stint gave him an opportunity to speak at length with Mr Lee and other key players in the Singapore-India relationship, including President Nathan.

Yesterday, Iseas director K. Kesavapany told about 150 people at the book launch that Mr Nathan was the "hidden hand" behind the book.

Mr Nathan explained: "I was involved and I knew the story had to be told."

Mr Datta-Ray describes the process of researching and writing the book as "one discovery after another of Mr Lee's intellectual involvement in India".

"He saw the potential that India could be - there were no platitudes, but a realistic assessment of the people and of the situation."



At the book launch at the Shangri-La Hotel yesterday were (from left) Professor Wang Gungwu, chairman of Iseas; President S R Nathan; author of the book Sunanda K. Datta-Ray; and Iseas director K. Kesavapany. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

## President hopes new book will 'set the record straight'

PRESIDENT S R Nathan supported the idea of a book on Singapore's longstanding interest in India because he witnessed many of the events first-hand, he said yesterday.

Also, in the course of his earlier career as a civil servant, he had encountered Indian diplomats who called Mr Lee Kuan Yew anti-Indian.

Mr Nathan hopes the new book on Minister Mentor Lee's attempts over 50 years to get India to take an interest in South-east Asia will set the record straight.

He told reporters yesterday, at the launch of *Looking East To Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India*, that his

own interest in India was sparked in 1943, when, at age 19, he heard Indian independence leader Subhas Chandra Bose speak in Singapore.

Said Mr Nathan, now aged 85: "I've never seen a politician speaking so eloquently without a piece of paper."

What's more, "he addressed the audience in English and half the audience did not understand what he was saying, but people followed him".

Mr Nathan also travelled with Mr Lee on several of his visits to India, and saw "his fascination for India, his interest in trying to understand it".

He recalled Mr Lee admiring the Ellora and Ajanta caves in Maharashtra

state, and wondering how, without technology, people could build elaborate temples carved into the rock.

Mr Lee may have been "very critical" of India at times, but he also understood its constraints, said Mr Nathan. He hopes the book will help Singaporeans understand why Mr Lee was fascinated with India and why he keeps calling on the Asian giant to play a role in the region.

He also hopes it will get a younger generation fired up "in this passion for India, notwithstanding all the negative reports you get about its economy or about poverty".

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Mr Lee, he added, also believes that Asian stability demands competition and cooperation between the two Asian giants, China and India.

The book's title refers to Singapore being the first stop on India's road across the Pacific, to America, when it adopted a Look East policy in the 1990s.

And Mr Datta-Ray notes the impact of Singapore on a younger generation of Indian politicians, in particular, rising star Rahul Gandhi. "Amidst the marvels of Sin-

gapore, Lee seems to have dazzled Rahul most," he wrote.

Singapore may have influenced two of Mr Rahul's decisions, he said. First, he slapped a legal notice on Newsweek for suggesting he had not completed his studies at Harvard and Cambridge universities, forcing the United States magazine to apologise and qualify its earlier statements. Second, he resisted calls to take ministerial office although he was made a party general secretary in 2007.

Mr Lee had told the author that if Mr Rahul was wise, "he should not take the lead position until he is fully equipped to understand all parts of the complex and very intricate whole of India... and surrounds himself by very able people to run it until then".

The book hit the bestseller lists in India within the first week of its publication there in late November. It is available for \$29.90 at major bookstores here.

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